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ABSTRACT

A variety of factors related to beginning reading in Sweden are considered in this paper. Among the topics discussed are the following: age of school entrance and beginning reading, factors related to school maturity and reading readiness, the importance of appropriate teaching techniques in the critical beginning stages of reading instruction, organizational steps taken in Sweden to further the individualization of reading instruction, the Swedish tradition of delaying reading instruction until the primary school, the importance of a good verbal environment in children's early years, goals of reading instruction, the need for a stress on meaning from the beginning of reading instruction, the use of combined methods of instruction in Sweden, the importance of teacher competence, and the teaching of immigrant children. Some research results on beginning reading are also described; these relate to factors associated with reading disabilities in the first grade, attempts to reduce cases of reading disability, and the teaching of reading to six-year-old children in preschool. The paper concludes by noting the need for cross-national comparative studies to aid in determining the most effective teaching methods and the most appropriate age for school entrance and for beginning reading instruction. (GT)

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BEGINNING READING IN SWEDEN

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BEGINNING READING IN SWEDEN

Age of school entrance and beginning reading

We know very little about the considerations behind the choice of age of school entrance in different countries. In most cases, these decisions were made a long time ago. We have just been informed that children in USA and Canada enter school at six years of age and the assumption is that they all will be taught to read in the first grade. So is at least the general expectation by the children as well as by their parents.

In countries such as West Germany, Hungary and France, only to mention a few, the general practice is also to start the teaching of reading at the age of six. But the age at which the majority of children are introduced to reading varies from country to country. For example, in Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia formal reading instruction begins at the age of five. Schools in the Scandinavian countries - Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden - and also those in for instance Poland and Sovjet Union - do not introduce reading instruction until the age of seven, and sometimes even later, depending upon the maturational level of the individual child. At present, there is a tendency in many countries to reconsider the regulations concerning the age at which a child is allowed to enter school.

In this process of reconsideration, the results of comparative cross-national studies should be of great value. My bold introductory statement in this respect is that all nations having stipulated a certain age of school entrance are wrong - regardless if this age is five, six seven or any other age.

Children of the same chronological age differ widely in their capacity to learn, their intelligence, their background experiences, and in all kinds of personality traits. Reserch

workers all over the world are in agreement on this point. My own investigations of first grade children in Sweden (Malmquist, 1977) uncovered a range in mental age from 4 years and 11 months to 11 years and 8 months, while differences between the children's chronological ages were very small. (seven years ± three months).

A great range of ability as to other variables at school entrance was also noted in another experimental study of mine in Sweden. I found that there were a number of the seven year old first-grade-children in the population studied, who did not know even the letters in their own names. Only 2 to 3 per cent of these children knew all the small letters; 80 per cent of them cound not read a single word in an easy prose text, standardized for the end of the spring term of the first grade. On the other hand around 2 per cent of the children were able to read at an achievement level equivalent to that of the beginning of third grade.

Taking into account the observed great differences as to maturation and abilities in various respects between children of the same age I am of the opinion that the use of a fixed chronological age as a criterion of a child's readiness for school entry and learning to read should be opposed- regardless if a country has chosen five, six or, as Sweden, seven years of age as the delimiting factor for the school entry. It seems to me that a flexible time for the school start and a slow and successive introduction of the pupils from the preschool to the school is the only reasonable administrative policy to be recommended. An integration of preschool and the primary school would dedramatize the school start and make it function better and in a more natural way.

School maturity and reading readiness relative concepts - many factors to be considered

I share the opinion of the Swedish school authorities that it is extremely important for the personality development and mental health of the child that the contact with the school be positive from the very beginning. Every child ought to be given the opportunity to feel the great satisfaction and motivation for continued work that is connected with success in learning to read and write.

But I believe that the age factor has been overestimated as criterion of school maturity in Sweden as well as in most other countries. A greater flexibility as to beginning age in Swedish shools is from my point of view highly desirable.

The concepts of school maturity and reading readiness ought to be looked upon as relative and not as absolute. Concepts of this kind should be considered in terms of the learning and the adjustments of various kinds that the first-year curriculum demands of the beginners. And even more so: the adjustments the school is prepared to make to the prerequisites of the child.

There is obviously a great need for more research on a cross-national scale, before any more general conclusions can be made concerning the optimum age for the introduction of formal reading instruction to the majority of the children in a given cultural area.

And further, a great number of other factors than the chronological age are to be considered, when we try to determine the best age for beginning reading; factors such as the developmental level of the child, the number of pupils in the class, the competence and the experience of the teachers, the nature of the instructional material and the teaching methods.

Teaching a four or five year old child to read in a one teacher-one pupil-relationship is of course quite different from a situation, where you have one teacher and 25 or 35 pupils.

Jack Holmes, USA, made many years ago a statement in this connection which still seems to me to be of actual interest. He linked the ability of young children to the pupil-teacher ratio. "Other things being equal the earliest age at which a child can be taught to read is a function of the amount of time or help the teacher can give the pupil (Holmes, 1962). The younger the child, the more individual care and instruction is necessary. After having done a summary of available research within this area he came to the conclusion that the class size should be less than 10 children, if the teaching of reading to children below the age of five, is to have any chance of success.

The first stages of learning to read of critical importance

Inappropriate techniques difficult to unlearn

A failure in the early stages of learning to read may negatively affect a child's entire personality development. This view is becoming more and more widely accepted by Swedish School authorities as well as by teachers.

Good habits are critical in the acquisition of any new skill. Repetition is good only if what is being repeated is appropriate and desirable; otherwise, it can be very harmful. Inappropriate attitudes - for instance toward reading - as well as inappropriate techniques can be extremely difficult to unlearn.

The first stages of learning to read are therefore considered to be of critical importance.

In Sweden it is held that growth in reading, as growth in other learnings; cannot be hurried without some undesirable, even damaging, effects on some children.

Therefore, we try to make the transition from home to school as easy as possible by having the children go to school for only two hours a day the first two or three weeks of school, and in groups of no more than 12 or 13 children. Even if the majority of the seven year old children might be ready to be taught reading, when they start school, there are always some, who, for different reasons, have not reached the desired readiness level. It is considered unrealistic to expect that **these children will make normal progress in reading. Whatever the reasons are for their lack of readiness, the school must** let them get a calm and cautious start in reading and stimulate their development toward reading readiness in all possible **ways before the formal instruction in reading starts. Otherwise, these children run a big risk of becoming "failures" and of getting a lifelong dislike of reading.**

Organisational steps taken furthering individualisation of the teaching of reading

According to the objectives stated in the Swedish school law, the school has to stimulate each child's personal growth toward his development as a free, self-active, self-confident and harmonious human being. The school must give individual education.

The need for organizing instruction to provide, in an adequate way, for individual differences between children and within children as to various capacities, background experiences and personality traits, is more and more found to be evident and urgent. But much still remains to be done in practical application in Sweden, until the proud and far-reaching declarations in the school law are even in the neighbourhood of realization.

Some few steps to further a dignostic approach and individualization in teaching reading have nevertheless been taken, in all fairness we have to admit that. The class size has been reduced to a maximum of twenty-five pupils in the three first years and to thirty in the remaining six years of compulsory schooling. (At present the mean size, for the country as a whole, lies between 17 and 18 pupils per class). A further reduction of class size is at present vividly discussed.

The teacher is allowed to divide her class in two groups and teach only one group at the time during ten hours out of the childś weekly schedule of twenty hours in the first grade. By this means, the teacher has no more than thirteen students at a time, often no more than eight to ten. This procedure has significantly contributed to giving the teacher better opportunities than before for individalization of her teaching.

Some improvements have been noted lately as to the opportunities for individual tutoring, group teaching, and remedial teaching of reading in clinics and in ordinary classes.

A Bill accepted by the Swedish Parliament and now in effect since 1st of July this year - 1978 - will increase the possibilities for a flexible use of the personal and financial resources at the local municipality- and individual school-level. The governmental subsidies to the individual municipality may from now on be used in the way the local school authorities find most reasonable and efficient in the actual situation.

Special teachers may be used either for individual tutoring of children with reading difficulties, for remedial teaching in a reading clinic or in a remedial reading class, or if this is found to be more desirable, as counsellors and active assistants to the ordinary teacher in her direct teaching in the classroom. Teams of teachers of parallel classes may be formed.

The local school may adjust its financial and personal resources to its actual needs more so than before. Such a decentralization of the power of decision-making as to the best use of teacher resources is a step in the right direction for an improvement of the treatment and teaching of especially low-achievers in the Swedish schools, as I see it. And to help children with reading disabilities and ideally, to prevent reading disabilities to arise through early diagnosis and effective treatment is of immense importance, indeed. I miss, however, in Swedish curricula enough stress on the necessity of also devoting special attention and care for the good readers- the high- achievers.

Here the rigid age-graded school system in Sweden has another weak point. The common attitude that the high-achievers, the good readers will get along under all circumstances is from my point of view a very dangerous one. A small nation as Sweden cannot afford to waste its talents (and what nations can?). Andthat is what happens, if the most talented, the most **gifted pupils in a class are insufficiently motivated to strive toward higher levels of reading skills.**

They are in Sweden very often kept at the pace of the average readers in the class. From my point of view the high-achievers in the Swedish primary schools should be much more taken care of, given much more demanding reading tasks than is now generally the case.

They should be more steadily challenged to raise their level of reading performance.

No reading instruction in the preschool

A tradition is very firmly established in Sweden that implies that children should not receive reading instruction in the preschool. In the same way the parents avoid teaching their children to read at preschool age. They answer the children's questions as to words and letters. But very seldom they enter into a real teaching situation. They are afraid of doing something wrong.

A child will learn to read from a professional teacher in the primary school. That's the accepted principle.

Whe have not yet found a satisfactory answer to the question: "Why should we teach reading to two, three, or four year old children?" This may be possible, but we ask: Is it advisable? Is it desirable? and At what price?

This philosophy seems to be quite in contrast to the view, held by some people in e.g. USA that we ought to lower the beginning age and to push children to achieve reading ability at a more accelerated speed than hitherto. The truth may lie somewhere between these extremes. In my country we may have gone too far in our ambition to diminish the risk of failures by using a lot of time in over-learning reading-readiness skills.

There are, I am sorry to say, evident and unfortunate barriers between preschools and primary schools in Sweden. For a number of years I have myself urged that we should consider the teaching of reading as a continuous developmental process **ongoing from early childhood to adulthood. As a consequence of this theory a closer co-operation and even a real connection** between preschool and the first grade in school should **be established, and a greater flexibility as to the age of** beginning reading could be applied.

A poor verbal environment in the early years of life may cause serious reading problems later on.

There is in Sweden as in many other countries enough evidence to give us reason to state that a child's progress in learning to read to a considerable extent is dependent upon his experiences with the use of the spoken word in his preschool years. Thinking and language develop simultaneously.

The extension of meaning in language is a lifetime process. But lack of adequate training in the early years of life may seriously hamper the development of an individual's later reading performance- yes, indeed, his personality development on the whole.

Children living in homes on a low cultural level, where the adults are speaking a poor language characterized by a great paucity of ideas and thoughts, will be greatly handicapped. A poor verbal environment, where the adults seldom speak to the child and the conversation is limited in extent and variety, will negatively influence the child's development as to speaking ability and thereby cause great reading problems later on.

A child who has grown up in an environment where there are books available and much reading is done, and where books are treated with respect, has a good prospect of becoming a good reader. Poor readers tend to come from homes which have a lower standard of general culture than the homes of good readers. The development of reading ability is considered to reflect not only inherent aptitude but also opportunities for adequate training and motivation for learning. (Malmquist, 1958, 1969 and 1977)

Learning to read is for most children the very first encounter with a type of learning involving abstract symbols, intended to be associated with previous experiences. If the child has not been given the opportunities to acquire such a background of meaningful concepts and if the words presented in print

are not a part of his speaking vocabulary and used with real adequate understanding, he will most likely be greatly handicapped in his reading efforts form the very beginning.

The objectives decide the procedures, methods and materials to be used

In order to be able to choose good procedures for her teaching a teacher must be quite clear of the objectives of her reading instruction. It is generally recognized that the first goal of reading instruction is to develop the mechanics of reading skill, in synthesizing the words by sounding and in identifying words by sight and through the use of context, and structural analysis; skill of oral reading with good expression, pitch and enunciation etc.

Meaning is stressed from the very beginning

But this is not enough. From the very beginning of reading instruction various comprehension aspects must be stressed by the teacher. If reading is to be developed to act as a tool of learning and if we want to have the children to learn to like reading - which is the most important goal of all here roughly mentioned, the child must feel the meaning of what is taught during the reading lessons from the very beginning.

Methods of instruction

Research in Sweden and elsewhere has shown that there does not exist one method of teaching reading, which is best for all children. Rather, teachers should look for some proper combination of methods best fitted for each child. More research is needed, however, in order to identify procedures for teachers to match appropriate methods to the aptitudes, skills, attitudes, and interests of each child.

In Sweden as in many other countries you will find two main groups of methods used for the teaching of reading-analytical and synthetic. But none of them exists in a pure form. The existing basal reader systems do all use both analytic and synthetic methods, although in different proportions. Lately some alternative methods for learning to read- as for instance the language experience approach and psycholinguistic methods of various kinds - have caught some attention among Swedish teachers. They are mostly used as supplements to the traditional methods. With reference to the wide range of developmental ages in the school classes, it is held that every program of teaching reading should contain both synthetical and analytical methods from the very beginning. Otherwise there could be no provision for the aim that every individual should be given just that special assistance he may need, when he needs it.

In short, the exclusive use of only one method would be disapproved of in Sweden. In the United States, a similar view seems to be held by most reading specialists. The essential difference seems to lie in the timing of the various methods of acquiring elementary reading skills. We combine synthetic and analytical methods from the very beginning.

In the United States, they are mostly used in one or another kind of sequence. In Sweden, as well as e.g. in Belgium and Denmark, all phases of the language arts, namely listening,

speaking, writing and reading are integrated from the first lesson of formal reading instruction. In the USA, on the other hand, writing is usually introduced at some later point in the program.

Writing of words, syllables and letters is in Sweden taught from the very first lessons in the formal teaching of reading. **Writing is supposed to support the teaching of reading.** We prefer to use manuscript writing to cursive writing in these earlier stages, as the manuscript letters are more alike the printed ones than the cursive letters. They are easier to read and easier to write for the children with their immature motor ability at this developmental level.

The trend in Sweden is, that combined methods are used; and the different methods are mostly used side by side from the very first reading lessons. Whole word attack and sentence attack are used as well as an attack of words by synthesizing the various letters in the word by "sounding". Still the phonic method is nevertheless the predominant basic teaching procedure for the majority of the teachers. The question to be answered is not "if" phonics is to be used, but rather "when" and "to what extent" and "to whom".

Teacher competence dynamic rather than static

All very good teachers do not behave in the same way. This means that effective teachers may achieve their excellent results in different ways. We do not any longer in Sweden speak of teacher competence, teacher effectiveness as one single trait of a uniform character. We prefer to think of teacher effectiveness as a multidimensional and very complex trait. A good teacher is in command of a great many competencies. He is able to adjust his behavior, his methods of teaching, to the purpose of learning and to the varied background skills and knowledge of the different pupils. He should also be able and willing to continue learning from his own or/ and his collegues' experiences as well as from well documented research results.

We consequently like to view teacher competence as dynamic rather than static. A good teacher is supposed to ask not so much which methods, which procedures so and so many well known effective teachers use most frequently. He will rather try to find out under what conditions, for what kind of pupils, for what kind of purpose and goals etc do successful teachers behave so and so, use such and such procedures, methods, diagnostic instruments, learning materials and so on.

Teacher competence has not surprisingly been found to be a very important factor in beginning reading. Interalia, significant relationships were noted in extensive first grade studies in Sweden between the teacher's number of years of service and the pupils achievements in reading.

Teachers with more than 12 years of service attain distinctly better results in reading in their classes during the first year at school than do teachers with less than 12 years of service.

Teachers with more than 6 years of service attain better results than teachers with less than 6 years, (Malmquist-Inizan 1973, Malmquist-Valtin 1974).

Teaching of immigrant children

When discussing literacy and beginning reading we must not forget consider the great change of the educational situation which has taken place in Sweden during the last few decades due to the literacy needs of the immigrants.

Taking into account both foreign residents in the country, naturalized immigrants and children of immigrants, totally some 10 per cent of the population in Sweden is of foreign origin. Immigration accounts for 43 per cent of the total rise in the Swedish population during 1944-1975 according to the official statistics. In 1970 special guidelines for the teaching of immigrant children were included in the curriculum for the elementary school. It has been stated that the aim of the education for immigrant children should be active. bilingualism.

In a Bill, adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 1976 and which has come into effect from the autumn term 1977 the following programme was i.a. put forward:

1) All children attending nursery school and day nursery, elementary school and upper secondary school and speaking or regularly hearing a foreign language in their homes are to be entitled to home language lessons and practice.

2) It will be the duty of municipal authorities to inform immigrant children and their parents of home language practice and teaching facilities.

3) Grants- in-aid will be paid to municipalities to help cover the cost of home language instruction.

4) Priority is to be given to pre-school education and the junior and middle levels of elementary school, since the children's linguistic and personal development is

> dependent on their being given an early opportunity of developing their first language (i.e. their home language) in order to be able to be actively bilingual.

(Swedish Ministry of Education, 1977).

SOME RESEARCH RESULTS ON BEGINNING READING

On this occasion it is maybe appropriate to mention also some few Swedish research studies having bearing on the teaching of beginning reading even if it must be done in a very condensed form.

Factors related to reading disabilities in the first grade

Some years ago I carried out rather extensive investigations on factors related to reading disabilities in the first grade of the comprehensive school. More than 40 variables were studied in their relation to reading ability. Attention was paid to the child's preschool development. (birth, health, speech development etc).

His home background, its social and economic status, the educational level of his parents and other environmental factors were also taken into consideration. Moreover, the respective teachers evaluated a number of personality factors for each pupil. Their vision, hearing, reading ability, visual perception, spelling ability, intelligence, etc., were tested. Some teacher and school variables were also included in the studies.

The following factors were those found most closely related to reading disabilities in the first grade and also those that differentiated most distinctly the group of poor readers from the group of good readers:

Intelligence, ability to concentrate, persistence, self-confidence and emotional stability-nervousness in the child; ability to spell according to some spelling tests, and visual perception measured by five visual perception tests; socio-economic group, parents' level of education, and interest in reading in the home; experience of child's teacher, measured by number of years in the profession.

On the basis of detailed case studies it was found that children with special reading disabilities (the concept operationally defined) deviated very markedly from the mean of the population studied in respect of several other variables in addition to reading ability. To judge by these results, reading disabilities at first grade level are never isolated defects. In all the cases studied reading disabilities existed together with deficiencies, disturbances or unfavourable conditions in many other areas.

Judging by the results of these investigations it appears reasonable to draw the important conclusion that, to **attempt to find a single factor which will entirely explain the occurrence of reading disabilities is, in the great majority of cases, a vain endeavour. Most frequently there** appear to be several factors in constellation which are related to reading failure. Many of these factors seem to be closely interrelated. There appears to be an interplay between the child's general physical, intellectual, emotional and social development and the development of his reading ability. (For a broader discussion, see Malmquist-Valtin, 1974, and Malmquist, 1977).

Reduction of cases of reading disabilities by up to 80 per cent

The number of cases of reading disabilities in grades 1-3 of the comprehensive school may be considerably reduced by an early, careful diagnosis of all children already at the school start in grade 1 and by the immediate establishment of a teaching situation synthesizing ongoing diagnosis - treatment and remedial teaching for those children, who on the basis of the diagnostic findings could be expected to experience special reading disabilities, when offered only ordinary teaching facilities.

By the use of specially constructed test batteries it is possible to put forward a much more reliable prediction than before as regards the development of the children's reading ability and to decrease to a considerable extent the error margin in the selection of pupils needing remedial teaching in a reading clinic.

Those are some of the results reported on a six-year longitudinal investigation, comprising in the pilot study twenty classes with a total of 386 pupils, and in the field experiments seventy-two classes with a total of 1653 pupils from twelve cities in various parts of Sweden, (followed in grades one through three).

Using an operational definition of special reading disabilities it was found that more than 80 per cent (83 per cent to be exact) of the cases identified as potential reading disability cases were prevented from occurring. The study further shows that the optimistic hopes, totally eliminating reading disability cases through remedial procedures such as those used within the experimental group in this research project, were not fulfilled. (Malmquist, 1969, and 1977).

Teaching of reading in preschool

During a four-year longitudianl project the effect of individualized reading and writing instruction for six-year-olds at preschool has been studied as compared with ordinary preschool activities, not including reading and writing instruction.

This effect was studied with reference to the development of the pupils' reading and writing skills up to the end of grade three of the comprehensive school (Malmquist, 1978).

This investigation is the very first systematic one carried out in Sweden, including the teaching of reading and writing to six-year-old children.

The results of the investigation show i.a. that by an early identification of potential reading failures and by a conscious follow-up of language development and a cautions individualized teaching of reading and writing at a low speed already in the preschool, the number of pupils needing special remedial reading in reading clinics and remedial reading classes was greatly diminished during the first three years in the comprehensive school (around 45 per cent reduction).

The early start in learning to read and write was found to be of special importance for verbally handicapped children, coming from an environment, where the adults seldom speak to the child and the conversation is limited in extent and variety. The slow speed in the preschool training gave them fair opportunities to succeed in acquiring the necessary **background of meaningful concepts, a sufficiently large vocabulary, ability to listen attentively and to speak reasonably well.**

The experimental group children were superior to the control-group children at practically all intelligence and maturity levels at the end of first grade. The effects of the early training in reading and writing according to the used model

were found to remain through grades 2 and 3, although the differences between the test results of the two groups were getting smaller.

The main conclusion I have drawn from this experiment is that especially for various reasons verbally handicapped children profit by early identification and assistance and a prolonged time of learning the basic skills in reading and writing (4 years instead of 3 for the attainment of the same general objectives).

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